

Pinellas commissioners approve digital billboards

By C. Ryan Barber, Times Staff Writer

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— Commissioners cleared the way Tuesday for digital billboards in unincorporated Pinellas County, voting to lift a nearly two-year moratorium on a new generation of advertising that has drawn public safety concerns.

With commissioner Kenneth Welch absent and commissioner Karen Seel dissenting in both votes, the commission signed off on a deal to remove four sign faces for each digital billboard with a message lasting 60 seconds. The companies, Clear Channel Outdoor and CBS Outdoor, must remove an additional four faces to lower the message times to 15 seconds.

Also approved was an acceleration of the billboard removal schedule.

"The industry has changed," said Susan Latvala, the commission's chairwoman. "Digital has become the wave of the future."

Seel, accompanied by commissioner Neil Brickfield in opposing the schedule change, said her opposition is rooted in a single principle: Digital billboards will pose another roadway distraction.

"There's already texting," Seel said.

Criticizing the ordinances as a "step too far," Clearwater City Council member and Scenic Pinellas leader Bill Jonson quoted Theodore Roosevelt in condemning the deal.

"Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin your country of its beauty, its riches or its romance," he said.

For Jonson, a longtime billboard opponent, Tuesday marked the latest day in the history of the county's concessions to the billboard companies.

Todd Pressman, a lobbyist for Clear Channel, said the electronic billboards would serve to clear signs from unincorporated portions of the county while providing more accessible advertising for small businesses and public service organizations. He noted that the Tampa Police Department named Clear Channel its 2011 corporate sponsor of the year.

"Call out the lumberjacks," Pressman said, as he departed the meeting. "We're taking down billboards."

Commissioners noted that the ordinances apply only to unincorporated portions of the county. Individual municipalities may pass ordinances specific to their city limits.

In St. Petersburg, the City Council is brokering a deal with the city's largest billboard owner, Clear Channel Outdoor, on a deal that would require companies to tear down 10 traditional billboards for each digital one installed.

After the public hearing, Seel wistfully reflected on the early 1990s, when mayors from St. Petersburg and the rest of Pinellas County gathered to pass a countywide ordinance regulating the billboards.

"It's a shame how they've been whittled away over the years," she said.

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